



PETROICA PHOENICEA; Gould



# PETROICA PHŒNICEA, *Gould.*

## Flame-breasted Robin.

*Petroica phœnicea*, Gould in Proc. of Zool. Soc., Part IV. p. 105; and in Syn. Birds of Australia, Part I.

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VAN Diemen's Land and the south-eastern portion of the Australian continent constitute the natural habitat of this species; in the former country it is very common, but in New South Wales and South Australia it is not so numerous, and is very local. It is far less arboreal than the *Petroica multicolor*, giving a decided preference to open wastes and cleared lands rather than to the woods: in many of its actions it much resembles the Wheatears and other true Saxicoline birds, often selecting a large stone, clod of earth or other substance, on which to perch and show off its flame-coloured breast to the greatest advantage. As the season of nidification approaches it retires to the forests for the purpose of breeding, building its cup-shaped nest in the chink of a tree, in the cleft of a rock, or any similar situation. It is a very familiar species, seeking rather than shunning the presence of man, and readily taking up its abode in his gardens, orchards, and other cultivated grounds. It is to be found in the neighbourhood of Hobart Town at all seasons of the year, and I have even taken its nest from a shelving bank in the streets of the town.

Its food consists of insects of various kinds, which are principally procured on the surface of the ground.

It has a pretty cheerful song, uttered somewhat low and inwardly; the male generally sings over or near the female while she is sitting upon her eggs.

The nest, which is thick and warm, is formed of narrow strips and thread-like fibres of soft bark, matted together with cobwebs and sometimes wool, and lined with hair and feathers, or occasionally with fine hair-like grasses. The general colour of the eggs is greenish white, spotted and freckled with purplish and chestnut-brown: much variety occurs in these markings, some assuming the form of large bold irregular spots and blotches, while in others they are merely minute freckles; the eggs are three in number; their medium length nine lines, and breadth seven lines.

I have not yet satisfied myself respecting the changes which this species undergoes, or what time elapses before it assumes the red garb; some individuals certainly breed while in the brown dress, and they may frequently be heard singing while clothed in this sombre-coloured plumage; the *Petroica multicolor*, on the contrary, would appear to obtain its red breast during the first autumn, as I have a specimen killed on the 8th of February with a fine red breast, while the colouring of the other parts of its plumage is indicative of immaturity.

The male has the crown of the head and all the upper surface sooty grey, except a small white spot across the forehead, a patch of the same colour on the shoulders and the anterior edges of the tertials; primaries and tail-feathers greyish black, except the outer feathers of the latter, which are nearly all white; the second tail-feather on each side is also tinged with white; upper part of the throat sooty grey, the rest of the under surface rich scarlet; under tail-coverts white; irides, bill and feet black.

The female is uniform brown above; wings dark brown; tertials and wing-coverts edged with reddish grey; tail brown; the outer tail-feathers on each side almost wholly white; all the under surface reddish grey; irides, bill and feet black.

The young resembles the female, but has the centre of the feathers lighter, and the corners of the mouth yellow; bill and feet blackish brown.

The Plate represents the male, female and nest of the natural size.